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Adolescent Girls' Need for Love in Two Cultures—Nigeria and the United States

Osayimwense Osa

The teacher's major goal is to guide the selection of books and to help adolescents read literature as human experience—not to teach a fixed number of books, a smattering of bibliographical data, or a miscellaneous collection of historical fact. Such information may support and extend but can never supplant the reader's perception of experiences communicated by the author.

Walter Loban, Margaret Ryan, and James Squire, *Teaching Language and Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961, p. 436)

In the canon of literature, one meets good novels, mediocrities, and worse, but it is the significant and well-written ones irrespective of cultural milieu that are worth the reading time of adolescents. Good literature is one of the few places left in modern life where the uniqueness of the individual is celebrated while at the same time common threads that bind people together are revealed (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980, p. 403). Research into the fundamental uniformity or difference in adolescent development in various societies, especially in literature, is rare but worthwhile. It is on this premise that this article will focus on one junior novel from the United States and one from Nigeria—Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* set in pre-independence Nigeria and Bette Greene's *Summer Of My German Soldier* set in the United States during World War II. Although probably neither Buchi Emecheta nor Bette Greene knew the other's work, the thematic similarity is obvious.

The protagonists of both novels are girls in their early adolescence. Aku-nna, a Nigerian in

Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, is thirteen at the beginning of the story, and Patty Bergen, a Jew in Greene's *Summer Of My German Soldier*, is twelve. Both Aku-nna and Patty long for love and company and from this common desperate longing for love or companionship, the novels get their strengths. John E. Horrocks (1976) contends that:

When parental domination is harsh, unusual, or irregular, severe reactions by the adolescent are likely to follow. This becomes particularly true when the parents' attitude is overly protective or overly rejectant. (p. 470)

This contention applies to the plights of Aku-nna and Patty Bergen in their relationships with their parents or relations.

At thirteen, Aku-nna loses her father, Ezekiel Odia, and comes under the guardianship of her selfish uncle, Okonkwo, who regards her as an asset or commodity to fetch him enough bride price to help him become an obi (an Ibo chief in Nigeria) and receive the highly priced *Eze* title in Ibuza. Her selfish uncle, Okonkwo, inherits her mother, Ma Blackie, and soon impregnates her. Ma Blackie in turn steadily envelopes herself in the politics of Okonkwo's polygamous home. Subsequently she virtually neglects her daughter, Aku-nna, who in turn begins to feel the pinch of loneliness.

She had lost her father. Her mother was literally lost to her, so deeply was Ma engulfed in the affairs of Okonkwo's household; it was difficult sometimes to remember that she had been married to Aku-nna's father. Her brother was too young, too spoiled to be any consolation to her. . . . It came to Aku-nna clearly now that she was completely alone. (p. 89)

In desperation she falls in love with Chike, an African social outcast, "OSU."

Like Aku-nna, Patty Bergen experiences a feeling of loneliness. Her father does not want her to play with Freddy Dowd, one of the neighborhood children. She longs to join the company of Edna Louise, Juanita Henkins, Mary Sue Joiner, and Donna Rhodes going to a Christian gathering at the Baptist Training Camp in the Ozarks, but her Jewish mother prevents her. Her passionate appeal to her mother only falls on her mother's deaf ears.

I asked my mother if I promised (cross my heart) not to sing those songs and only to pretend to listen when they talked about Him. "After all," I pleaded, "Jesus isn't contagious." But she said, "No—It's only for Baptists." (pp. 48-49)

Her mother's action intensifies Patty's loneliness. Jenkinsville, Arkansas, to Patty Bergen, is a "flat and fried bit of earth." Patty feels her life is sterile: "There was nobody to talk to and nothing to do" (p. 49). It is in this barren atmosphere that Patty meets Anton, a German prisoner of war, in her father's store, instantly develops an intense love for him, and later takes care of him after his escape. But how can one imagine any close relationship between a Jewish girl and a German soldier during World War II? Similarly how can one expect any close relationship between a freeborn girl like Aku-nna and a descendant of an OSU (outcast dedicated mainly by Ibo tribe of Nigeria to some African gods) like Chike?

Both Aku-nna and Patty desperately want company to satisfy their common need—selfworth. Their common desperation overrides custom and traditional values, and they battle the prevailing mores of their respective societies. Like Patty in *Summer Of My German Soldier* who falls in love with an enemy, Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* is equally starved for affection and falls deeply in love with an OSU descendant who according to Ibuza society is not free to mix with freeborns. Anton in *Summer Of My German Soldier* and Chike in *The Bride Price* are not looked on favorably in Jenkinsville, Arkansas, and Ibuza, but Patty and Aku-nna find that these social outcasts provide the love and care which they need. At fifteen, Aku-nna elopes with Chike.

However, the actions of Aku-nna and Patty are not without consequences. Aku-nna dies in her first childbirth, and sheltering Anton is the beginning of shattering experiences for Patty. Too young to be prosecuted under the "Treason Act"

of the American government, Patty is still sent to the Arkansas Reformatory for Girls.

Regardless of the somewhat bitter consequences of their actions, Aku-nna and Patty learn to develop a sustaining faith in life which subsequently helps them to overcome problems. Aku-nna's gloom in a sterile Ibuza gives way to happiness in the company of Chike, and even at the moment of her death at childbirth, she is satisfied at having a brief but pleasant taste of love. She is truly a happy lover in death:

I told you that I would not keep our love a secret. Now with our little girl, everybody will know. They will all know how passionately we love each other. Out love will never die. . . . Let us call her Joy too, the same name we gave to the bed on which she was conceived. (p. 67).

Similarly, lonely and awkward Patty experiences a surge of spirit in her relationship with Anton. Her initials "P.B." which Anton uses for her assume a rich significance precisely because they are used by someone who really cares. Patty's relationship with Anton helps her to appreciate herself as a person.

"P.B." he called me, and my initials took on a strength and beauty that never before was there. And now that I had of my own free will broken faith with my father and my country, I felt like a good and worthy person. (p. 104)

Patty attaches emotional significance to Anton's ring which he gave her, and this ring unleashes a flood of emotion which makes Patty realize that her relationship with her Jewish parents may not be completely hopeless.

"I brought his ring to my lips barely believing it. He did love me . . . and maybe one day my mother and father will too." (p. 191)

Both Aku-nna and Patty are developed in considerable depth, and unlike a welter of paperthin adolescent characters featured in many junior novels, they emerge as rounded characters. Both *The Bride Price* and *Summer Of My German Soldier* reveal the mind and character of two teenage girls—a Nigerian and an American—who because of their common desperate need for love and companionship go against age-old custom and practices and experience pain in the process. The successful characterizations of Aku-nna and Patty enhance the unity of *The Bride Price* and *Summer Of My German Soldier*.

Despite the vast Atlantic which separates Nigeria and the United States, these two sympathetic

and touching novels, written with vivacity and deftness, reveal that young adolescent girls in both cultures have a common need for love. Such books introduce and inspire children from a variety of backgrounds to an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of cultures other than theirs, and mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's culture is vital to harmonious world relationships. If teachers can pique adolescents toward thinking along these lines early in life, rather than leaving them to figure it out late in adulthood, they will have succeeded in laying the foundation for a lasting world peace.

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Kite Graveyard

Last night,
Before the last light of day
Slipped away over the hill,
We found out
Where kites go when kites go
Out of sight.
We were walking in the woods,
Talking about nests,
In trees,
Wondering how to tell both trees
and nests apart
When we found out.

High up in the tops of trees,
a flimsy monument to Spring and Hope,
Five kites in pieces and shreds fluttered.
Weathered and faded, ragged,
We figured they'd wintered in the park,
Frozen to death and died.
They had become parts of birds' and squirrels' nests.
Which was which we wouldn't tell,
But we found out
Where kites go when kites go
Out of sight.

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